

Dr Zwicker Testimony for Section 2 and Against Section 3 of HB5425

I am wearing a bright orange tie today because it is my son's favorite color and to signify to all of you how important it is for me on his behalf to strongly support section 2 of this bill and strongly oppose section 3. Caleb is 4 years old and has autism. When he entered preschool in Hamden, he had never eaten solid food, had no language at all, spent most of his day spinning wheels on toy cars and trucks, and had made no developmental progress since infancy. The teachers and director of the program told me that they had the expertise and an ABA room in the school that would be perfect for him. ABA has been shown through thousands of studies to be the most effective treatment for children with autism – which is why it is so prevalent in schools now across the country and why it is now covered by insurance companies in Connecticut, California, and several others states when provided by a nationally board certified behavior analyst.

What my son got at preschool was an ABA environment that was what they knew how to offer, not a good ABA program. When I asked what training the teachers in the room had in ABA and how many behavior analysts they had working in the program, they indicated that they received 4 hours of consultation a week from a board certified behavior analyst and had taken a few classes and had professional development on ABA and working with children with autism. They assured me and Caleb's mother that they had decades of experience and all the right expertise while we sat around the table discussing Caleb and his ABA program. Their cute anecdotes about Caleb and apparent expertise convinced Caleb's mother, a Yale researcher, that they were doing the right things. The school had no data and could not demonstrate that they were making progress on Caleb's two biggest deficits – eating solid food and language.

How do I know what good looks like and why was I so frustrated? I have a doctorate in applied behavior analysis and I had spent years working in homes and with schools with people of all ages who have developmental disabilities. A good ABA program relies upon constant behavioral data collection and using specific behavioral methods of teaching in a 1:1 and small group environment as well as behavioral incidental teaching throughout the day. Services are provided by trained ABA therapists and overseen daily by a board certified behavior analyst.

I paid out of pocket for a BCBA from ACES to work in the evenings and on weekends with Caleb. She got him eating and speaking in just 2 weeks – something neither the school nor Birth to Three service providers had managed to accomplish in 2 years of trying.

I kept pushing the school and urged my son's mother to move to New York or California because they had good ABA services in schools and it was covered by insurance in home as well. After 4 months trying to push the school to provide appropriate services, I noted that my

next steps were through Due Process and a lawsuit. It should not have taken that step to get Caleb what he has now in preschool, 30 hours of ABA programming each week by a trained therapist overseen daily by a board certified behavior analyst. Caleb has gained on his typical peers to the point that in my expert opinion he is likely one of the 20% of children who recover from autism through intensive, early treatment by qualified professionals – BCBAs. I don't want to have to go through the same process next year when he goes into Kindergarten in a different Hamden school. I recently stopped traveling across the county each week coaching executives and leaders of Fortune 50 companies and began working for ACES (Area Cooperative Educational Services) so I can make sure Caleb has the appropriate ABA services to continue his recovery and so other children have that same level of ABA support.

I am here on Caleb's behalf and to make sure that all Connecticut children with autism have the same quality ABA services, when identified in their IEPs, that Caleb son has and that other kids don't need parents with Ph.D.s in applied behavior analysis to ensure that they get high quality ABA services. The schools need clear direction through section 2 to know that when ABA is provided that it must be provided by and supervised by qualified behavior analyst. I am here also to ensure that parents do not have the additional burden of being an expert in the area of their child's disability and exactly what treatment is most effective and who is qualified to provide it and exactly what it should look like to get a quality ABA program for their son or daughter. Parents should not be required to hire experts like me at their own expense to explain what the school should already know and be doing. I strongly support section 2 and oppose section 3 for my son and all kids with autism in Connecticut.

Thank you for listening today and for including section 2 and removing section 3 of HB5425 on behalf of Caleb and the thousands of other kids in Connecticut like him.

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